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An American Folk Opera? Triangulating Folkness, Blackness, and Americanness in Gershwin and Heyward's *Porgy and Bess*

The conscious choice of an "American Folk Opera" as the subtitle for George Gershwin and DuBose Heyward's 1935 opera Porgy and Bess reveals much about the interplay of tradition, race, and national identity during the Great Depression. Although the opera's authentic "folkness" was brought into serious question by such period critics as Virgil Thomson and Hall Johnson, Porgy and Bess did generate a critical debate that propelled the triangulation of folkness, blackness, and Americanness into the national consciousness at a crucial moment when the country was struggling to define who its folk were and how folk heritage(s) could form the foundation of a common American identity.

WHEN THE CURTAIN ROSE in 1935 to premiere George Gershwin's most celebrated work, *Porgy and Bess*, the program notes proudly proclaimed the production an "American folk opera." The conscious choice of the term "folk" in the opera's subtitle marked a radical departure from the jazz discourse that had surrounded Gershwin's earlier concert works. But, more important, the coupling of "folk" with "American" in describing an opera written about and performed by African Americans revealed much about the interplay of tradition, race, and national identity at that time.

This article explores the rhetoric of folk authenticity and related issues of racial representation that surrounded the 1935 opening of *Porgy and Bess* and the opera's immediate antecedent, DuBose and Dorothy Kuns Heyward's 1927 critically acclaimed play, *Porgy*. These productions were situated in a turbulent and (for folklorists) fascinating period in American cultural history marked by a flurry of renewed national interest in indigenous folk culture: Harlem Renaissance critics touted the efficacy of blues, spirituals, and southern black folktales; regionalist authors looked to build literature centered in local folk experience; the nascent folk music revival brought the sounds of rural America to urban and middle-class listeners; and American composers stepped up their efforts to create nationalist music inspired by jazz and regional folk styles. The confluence of these myriad cultural currents in the early 1930s

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prompted composer Gershwin and librettist Heyward to append the term “folk” to the subtitle of their opera, *Porgy and Bess*. This move provoked a noisy debate among period critics over the validity of an American “Negro” folk opera—a cultural conversation that raised critical questions concerning the role of folklore and race in the larger project of forging national art. If Americans were indeed committed to building serious literature, theater, and music based on indigenous folk materials, then whose traditions would represent America? Could the folklore of southern African Americans come to embody the essence of a distinctly American ethos, and, if so, could cultural outsiders such as Gershwin and Heyward transform black folk materials into art that would stand the test of highbrow scrutiny while maintaining the integrity of the original traditions? Were such endeavors by white creators truly noble efforts to elevate the art of black folk music to the prestigious concert stage or simply neominstrel practices (this time minus the blackface) aimed at commodifying black otherness for consumption by white audiences who longed for glimpses of authentic culture to countervail their increasingly complex, modern world? Although these questions can never be definitively resolved, their contemplation focuses attention on conscious attempts to harness the folk in the service of varying and sometimes contradictory cultural agendas, ranging from those of artists and critics who invoked the folk and their lore in the name of a common national experience, to those ethnic and regional advocates who sought to celebrate and elevate a particular folk culture while protecting that culture from outside appropriation and misinterpretation.

The saga of Catfish Row offers an ideal cultural text for examining popular perceptions of folk authenticity and race during the waning years of the Jazz Age and the onset of the Great Depression. The 1927 play, *Porgy*, received considerable press during its initial 217-night New York run, benefiting from the positive reception of the original 1925 novel and northern critics’ curiosity regarding the treatment of the “Negro problem” by a progressive southern writer like Heyward. Capitalizing on Gershwin’s extraordinary celebrity, the opera *Porgy and Bess* garnered considerable press coverage during its 124 New York performances in late 1935 and early 1936. Critical responses to what was described as a “folk play” and “folk opera” thrust a variety of ideas about folk culture in general, and authentic southern black folk culture in particular, into the cauldron of public debate.

Although much ink has been spilled by musicologists on the significance of America’s most enduring opera, the folkness of *Porgy and Bess* has received little attention.¹ Folklorists have completely ignored the text, which is somewhat surprising, in light of the discipline’s recent interest in the relationship of authenticity and invented tradition to the phenomenon of nationalism.² If Regina Bendix is correct in her assertion that the search for folk authenticity has been at the heart of nationalist movements since the Romantic period (1997:7), then analysis of the discourse on folk authenticity that swirled around the great American folk opera seems a promising point of departure for exploring the contours of American folk nationalism during the Depression.

The son of Russian Jewish immigrants, Brooklyn-born popular song writer George Gershwin burst into the world of highbrow art music in 1924 when his first extended composition, *Rhapsody in Blue*, premiered at New York’s Aeolian Hall by the Paul

Whiteman orchestra. A concerto for piano and "jazz" orchestra, the work was shrewdly billed by Whiteman as "an experiment in modern music," seeming to suggest that Gershwin's jazz-tinged *Rhapsody* had the serious trappings of works by European and American modernist composers like Stravinsky, Ravel, Bartok, Cowell, and Ives (Oja 1994:648–52). Although the blurred tonalities and rhythmic syncopations of *Rhapsody* owed as much to ragtime and popular Tin Pan Alley songs as to bona fide jazz, the piece was hailed by critics as "symphonic jazz" and "highbrow jazz."³ The influential critic Carl Van Vechten subtitled his March 1925 *Vanity Fair* review of the piece "An American Composer Who is Writing Notable Music in the Jazz Idiom" and praised *Rhapsody* as "the finest piece of serious music that had ever come out of America."⁴ The success of Gershwin's *Rhapsody* prompted a flurry of activity by Aaron Copland, William Grant Still, George Antheil, and other American composers to create extended compositions that fused European orchestral forms and instrumentation with jazz-inflected rhythms and bluesy harmonies.⁵

Perhaps, as musicologist Charles Hamm has suggested, period critics stressed Gershwin's use of syncopated rhythms, blues tonalities, and jazzy instrumental shadings to portray his music as "progressive" and uniquely American, in spite of its otherwise conventional nineteenth-century romantic harmonies and formal structures (1995:312). This view was essential for critics like Van Vechten, who in 1925 saw jazz as the only possible route for creating vital and distinctly American concert music (Oja 1994:653). In any case, suggesting that jazz could and should play a crucial role in modern composition was critical to this discourse, and nowhere was the term "folk" to be found in the discussion of Gershwin's early concert works.⁶

Jazz authenticity was not an issue for Gershwin at this point in his career. Indeed, he never saw himself as a purveyor of genuine black jazz and purposely distanced himself from the earthier sounds of vernacular jazz, which he characterized as "crude" and "vulgar." As a composer and creative artist, he envisioned himself as a cultural elevator—one who transformed the raw building blocks of jazz in order "to bring out [jazz's] vitality and to heighten it with the eternal flame of beauty" (Gershwin 1925:30), and to "improve and transform [jazz] into finer, bigger harmonies" (Gershwin 1927:52).

Gershwin initially denied that jazz was exclusively the province of African Americans, and instead ascribed broader national origins to the music he viewed as "the spontaneous expression of the nervous energy of modern American life" (Gershwin 1925:30). He recognized, however, the centrality of black music to his own concert jazz, and in an April 1925 interview for *Musical America* he declared his interest in composing a "jazz opera" that would be based on "Negro materials" (Malkiel 1925). In December of that year, Whiteman organized another concert of symphonic jazz at Carnegie Hall, this time headlining Gershwin's twenty-minute pocket opera, *Blue Monday*, which he billed as a "one act jazz opera." The musical drama, which Gershwin had premiered in a single performance as part of *George White's Scandals of 1922*, was set in Harlem and included a number of blues-inflected songs connected by syncopated orchestral interludes. Although reviews were negative and Gershwin subsequently abandoned the work, *Blue Monday* confirmed his intentions of writing a grand American opera based on African American themes.⁷ But with the high energy and

erotic muse of Fitzgerald's Jazz Age in full swing, such an opera would be conceived of as "jazz," not "folk," in 1925.

In the fall of 1926, Gershwin paged through the novel *Porgy* (1925), DuBose Heyward's wistful tale of life, love, and death in Catfish Row, a semifictitious black slum situated adjacent to the bustling docks of Charleston, South Carolina, Heyward's hometown. Gershwin was so taken by the tragic story of the ill-fated love affair between Porgy, a crippled beggar, and Bess, a "loose" woman with a penchant for hard liquor, cocaine, and abusive men, that he immediately announced his intentions of turning the book into an opera. He was no doubt impressed by Heyward's vivid descriptions of southern black folklife, such as his account of the music and clothing at a festive parade:

Then the band, two score boys attired in several variations of the band master's costume, strode by. Bare, splay feet padded upon the cobbles; heads were thrown back, with lips to instruments that glittered in the sunshine, launching daring and independent excursions into the realm of sound. Yet these improvisations returned always to the eternal boom, boom, boom of an underlying rhythm, and met with others in the sudden weaving and raveling of amazing chords. An ecstasy of wild young bodies beat living into the blasts that shook the windows of the solemn houses. . . . Then came the carriages, and suddenly the narrow street hummed and bloomed like a tropic garden. Six to a carriage sat the sisters. The effect produced by the colors was strangely like that wrought in the music; scarlet, purple, orange, flamingo, emerald; wild, clashing, unbelievable discords; yet in their steady flow before the eye, possessing a strange, dominant rhythm that reconciled them to each other and made them unalterably right. (Heyward [1925] 2001:94-5)

The novel *Porgy* received mixed reviews. The *New York Times* (September 27, 1925) praised Heyward for "getting inside his [black] characters and their surroundings," and Mary White Ovington, writing for the *Amsterdam News* (December 2, 1925), called the novel a "magnificent story" that got "close to the life of the Negro." Conversely, black critic Theophilus Lewis of the *Messenger* (1926), argued that, as a white man, Heyward was "no more capable of interpreting Negro character than I [as a black man] am of interpreting Chinese character." W. E. B. Du Bois, writing in the *Crisis* (1926), lauded Heyward's sympathetic treatment of Charleston's black folk, but chastised him for ignoring the city's thriving black middle class. In a harbinger of things to come, African American critics were pleased at the attention the novel *Porgy* brought to southern folk culture, but raised doubts about the accuracy with which Heyward, as a white man, could portray their people.

Gershwin's dream of writing an opera based on Heyward's novel had to be put on hold when he discovered that Heyward's wife, playwright Dorothy Kuns Heyward, was already working on a dramatic treatment of the book. The result was the 1927 premier of the play *Porgy* at the Guild Theater in New York City. Interestingly, the Heywards and the Theatre Guild sponsors billed *Porgy* as "A Folk Play." In the introduction to the 1928 play book, DuBose Heyward described himself as possessing "a profound respect for the authentic in folklore" (Heyward 1928:xii). This respect led to the inclusion of recreated snatches of regional Gullah dialect, spiritual singing, and spontaneous prayer into his production, which he and Kuns Heyward insisted be performed by an all black cast, to "permit the interpretation of the story by the race with which it was concerned" (xiii). Heyward went on to note that, in "their desire

for complete authenticity," the Theatre Guild sent director Rouben Mamoulian and set designer Cleon Throckmorton to Charleston to "study the environment" and "absorb[ed] and record[ed] impressions" of the city (xiv–xv). Like the novel, the play reflected Heyward's belief that African Americans were heirs of a primitive and emotionally potent folk culture that he (and other whites) might appreciate as "a source of delight that I would have given much to possess" (x). Though tainted by elements of nineteenth-century racial romanticism and the love/theft paradox of minstrelsy, Heyward's rationale was clear: careful observation of southern Negro folk culture coupled with a sensitive interpretation by a black cast who Heyward believed possessed an innate sense of humor, rhythm, and emotional immediacy would ensure an "authentic" rendering of his tale on stage.

The mainstream press agreed. Reviews of *Porgy* were largely positive, and a number of critics were quick to pick up on Heyward's folk moniker. Brooks Atkinson, writing for the *New York Times* (October 11, 1927), called the play "a bit of folk-life" that accurately caught "the loyalties and superstitions of the Negro in what their true value must be" (1927a). A week later (October 16, 1927), he characterized the drama as "an illuminating chronicle of American folk-lore" and flippantly referred to the black cast as "the hobbledohoy niggers who swarm childishly through his [Porgy's] alley" (1927b). A review in the *Boston Transcript* (April 10, 1928) called *Porgy* "a folk-piece," describing the all black cast as "high pitched, full-throated, deep burning, snakish-sinister . . . primitive folk" (H. P. T. 1928). Other reviews raved about the "Dionysian ecstasy" (Krutch 1927), the "frenzy of singing and gesturing of emotional exultation" (Grant 1927), and the "eternal verities of primitive living" (I. W. L. 1928) evoked by the folk play's black cast.

While a few voices, most prominently black critic Floyd Calvin (1927), raised concerns over racial stereotypes in a story centered around Negro beggars, gamblers, dope peddlers, and murderers, the overall consensus of white critics of the period was that the Heywards' play conveyed an exotic folk primitivism that strongly appealed to the Guild's predominantly white audiences. Real black bodies on stage—singing, shouting, swaying, and praying in a fashion deemed racially appropriate by white critics and audiences—apparently translated into uncontested authentic performance. Equally important, the absence of a musical score (written by a white composer) obviated debate over the crucial issue of musical authenticity that would eventually haunt Gershwin's yet-to-be-composed opera.

In the wake of the play's success, the popular vaudeville singer Al Jolson and renowned musical theater composers Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II approached Heyward about the possibility of producing a blackface version of *Porgy* for Broadway. Heyward, however, remained committed to Gershwin's proposal for a more "serious" treatment of the work performed by an all-black cast, and in 1933 Gershwin and Heyward signed a contract with the New York Theater Guild to compose a grand opera based on the novel.⁸

When Gershwin began work on the opera in 1934, he wholeheartedly embraced Heyward's concept of "folk" production. This was not entirely surprising, for in the years just prior to his composing of *Porgy and Bess* there is evidence that Gershwin was drifting away from jazz in favor of the more encompassing umbrella of folk music.

Reconsidering the relationship of jazz and serious art music in 1930, he expressed his doubts that the former could be the sole foundation of the latter:

The only kinds of music which endure are those which possess form in the universal sense [formally composed art music] and folk music. All else dies. But unquestionably folk songs are being written and have been written which contain enduring elements of jazz. To be sure, this is only an element; it is not the whole. An entire composition written in jazz could not live. (Gershwin 1930:266–7)

Writing in 1933, he subordinated jazz to a subset of folk music, identifying the latter as the broader source for serious composers: “The great music of the past in other countries has always been built on folk-music. This is the strongest source of musical fecundity. America is no exception among the countries. The best music being written today is music which comes from folk-sources” (Gershwin [1933] 1961:186). Gershwin went on to underscore the diversity of American expression, listing “jazz, ragtime, Negro spirituals and blues, southern mountain songs, country fiddling, and cowboy song” as legitimate folk styles that “can be employed in the creation of American art-music” ([1933] 1961:186). Jazz was still an important source, but by no means the only source of folk inspiration.

Gershwin’s swing from jazz to folk was undoubtedly influenced by various cultural currents of the period that championed indigenous American art. As the Jazz Age gave way to the Great Depression, increasing numbers of artists and intellectuals turned to the folk traditions of the “common man” to forge a more democratic and pluralistic vision of America.⁹ B. A. Botkin’s influential essay (1929) on the new regionalism argued for an American literature inspired by local oral tradition, and urged writers to “return to the lower level of the folk, to the source of all art in the wonder and faith that are also the mother of religion” (Botkin 1929–1930:9). Heyward’s novel *Porgy* clearly exemplified this ideal. The following year novelist Ruth Suckow, writing for *Scribner’s Magazine*, praised American writers and painters for turning to the expressions of Negroes, Indians, and mountain hillbillies, concluding “the folk element in any national life is the root of its aesthetic traditions.”¹⁰

Similar calls were heard from visual art critics and collectors of the period. The 1932 exhibition “American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man, 1750–1900,” organized by Holger Cahill for New York’s Museum of Modern Art, fostered a new awareness of folk paintings and sculpture among urban intellectuals. The show signaled the canonization of American folk art while aiming to inspire contemporary artists and designers by drawing aesthetic parallels between American folk and modern art.¹¹ As an amateur painter of considerable talent, Gershwin certainly would have been aware of the 1932 MOMA show, and undoubtedly sympathetic to Cahill’s mission.

Equally significant was the urban folk music revival that was beginning to stir in the early 1930s. The founding of the Archive of American Folk Song under Robert Winslow Gordon in 1928, along with the establishment of a series of major folk festivals between 1928 and 1934, signaled a new national awareness of American folk music.¹² Songbooks such as Carl Sandburg’s *American Songbag* (1927) and John and Alan Lomax’s *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (1934) introduced urban audiences to an array of American folk songs and provided grist for the creative mills of highbrow composers Aaron Copland and Virgil Thomson.¹³ The 1934 Lomax song book, along with the 1936 col-

lection *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly*, broadened the established folk song canon beyond Anglo/Celtic ballads to include African American blues, spirituals, and work songs (Filene 2000:54–5). The Lomaxes played a crucial role in bringing attention to the neglected area of black folk music, noting in the introduction to *American Ballads and Folk Songs* that African Americans were responsible for “the most distinctive of [American] folk songs—the most interesting, the most appealing, and the greatest in quantity” (Lomax and Lomax [1934] 1994:xxxiv).¹⁴ In early 1935, as Gershwin worked over his opera score, the Lomaxes brought black songster Lead Belly to New York, a move that helped ignite the early urban folk music revival and placed African American folk songs center stage (Filene 2000:58–75).

On still another cultural front, the unabashed celebration of African American folk culture by Harlem Renaissance writers, composers, and concert singers offered Gershwin both intellectual justification and artistic models for composing a black folk opera. W. E. B. Du Bois's brilliant treatment of the spirituals in *The Souls of Black Folk* ([1903] 1982) had already laid the conceptual groundwork for establishing African American folklore as an important source of artistic inspiration for future generations of black poets and writers, a point that was not lost on prominent Harlem Renaissance critics. In the preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* ([1922] 1931), James Weldon Johnson proclaimed that Uncle Remus folktales “constitute the greatest body of folk lore that America has produced, and the spirituals the greatest body of folk song” (10) and praised popular Renaissance poets Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown for digging into “the genuine folk stuff” (6). Alain Locke's “new Negro” was modern, urban, and danced to the fresh jazz beat, but Locke recognized the rural South as the creative wellspring of black American culture. Thus, his seminal chronicle of the Renaissance, *The New Negro* ([1925] 1969), included hefty sections on the spirituals, folktales, and the legacy of African arts. In his specific writings on music, Locke encouraged composers to transform folk spirituals into staged art songs and extended concert works in order to create new hybrid genres that simultaneously embraced African American tradition and European modernity.¹⁵ Although it is unlikely that Gershwin actually read these works, Heyward and the legion of white culture critics who reviewed opera most certainly had. By the early 1930s, the Renaissance writers had fostered a growing appreciation for black vernacular culture among many New York writers, musicians, and cultural critics with whom Gershwin regularly rubbed shoulders.

Even more germane to Gershwin's project was the successful elevation of the spiritual to the concert stage by conservatory-trained black singers of the Harlem Renaissance. By the mid-1920s, Roland Hayes, Paul Robeson, and Marion Anderson—all disciplined in formal European vocal technique—had established respectable careers as concert singers and premiere interpreters of Negro spirituals. During the late 1920s, black professional choruses, modeled after nineteenth-century university vocal ensembles such as the Fisk Jubilee Singers and the Hampton Institute Singers, were popularizing European arrangements of African American spirituals and folk songs on the concert stage. Although several notable figures—including Carl Van Vechten, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston—questioned the authenticity of Europeanized concert spirituals, the tradition flourished in New York, which was home to

the two leading black choruses of the period, those led by Hall Johnson and Eva Jessye.¹⁶ Gershwin was familiar with the success of these ensembles in interpreting Negro folk spirituals in a high-art setting and eventually recruited Jessye to serve as choral director of *Porgy and Bess*.

Though well-versed in the jazz and ragtime music of Harlem and the concertized spirituals, Gershwin realized he had little direct contact with rural African American blues or spiritual singing that attracted folk song collectors and inspired the Harlem Renaissance writers. Determined to acquaint himself with what he perceived to be genuine black folk music, Gershwin undertook an authenticating journey to Folly Island, off the coast of South Carolina, in the summer of 1934. His "fieldwork" there consisted of attending Gullah church services, revival meetings, and funerals. Heyward, who accompanied Gershwin on many of these outings, recalled "the night when, at a Negro meeting on a remote sea-island, George started shouting with them. And eventually to their huge delight stole the show from their champion 'shouter.' I think that he is probably the only white man in America who could have done it" (Heyward 1935).

A reporter from the *Herald Tribune* who had been dispatched to cover Gershwin's southern sojourn described him as "bare and black above the waist" and recounted an incident where the local Negroes "collected in front of his cottage and beat the sand with their feet" while Gershwin played ragtime piano ("Gershwin Gets His Music Cues for *Porgy* on a Carolina Beach," July 8, 1934). Such accounts portrayed Gershwin as more than a keen white observer or collector of black folk music. They celebrated his ability to participate in the music making—a white man gone native, literally turning black in the tropical sun, able to out shout the best church singers—and to fascinate the local folks with his syncopated talents on the piano.

Just how successful Gershwin was at translating his Folly Island field experience into the score for a "folk opera" became a matter of much debate. Reviewing the October 10, 1935, New York premiere of the opera, *New York Times* critics Brooks Atkinson (1935) and Olin Downes expressed uncertainty over the folk opera question, with the latter simply praising Gershwin for "instinctive appreciation of the melodic glides and nuances of Negro song" and his "effective treatment of the Spirituals" (Downes 1935). Walter Kramer, writing for *Musical America*, admitted he did not know what a "folk opera" was, but applauded *Porgy and Bess* as "illustrative of American life" (1935).

Perhaps in response to some of the initial confusion over the term "folk opera," Gershwin penned an article for the *New York Times* ten days after the opera's opening in New York. Using somewhat circular logic, he explained:

Porgy and Bess is a folk tale. Its people [Negroes] naturally would sing folk music. When I first began to work on the music I decided against the use of original folk material because I wanted the music to be all of one piece. Therefore I wrote my own spirituals and folk songs. But they are still folk music—and therefore, being an operatic form, *Porgy and Bess* becomes a folk opera. (Gershwin 1935)

Implicit in his argument is that African Americans naturally (and perhaps exclusively?) express themselves through folk song, while he, the well-studied white interloper, could both write black folk songs and incorporate them into the more "serious" operatic form. Conveniently, the term "jazz" never enters the discussion. Later in the

article, when he draws parallels between *Porgy and Bess* and *Rhapsody in Blue*, Gershwin notes that to create the latter he "took blues and put them into a larger and more serious format" (1935). In this moment of self-revisionist history, Gershwin apparently replaced jazz with the folksier blues as the foundation for his earlier concert works.

Critics continued to review the production as a folk opera, with a number equating blackness with folk authenticity. Marcia Davenport, writing for *Stage* in November 1935, noted that because *Porgy and Bess* was "written for Negro singers within the framework of racial atmosphere, it goes down on record as the first American folk opera. It is indeed that. It abounds in color, it retains the quality of the Negro chant, the spiritual, the wail, the jazz, and the blues. It is derivative only so far as it should be derivative for authenticity. It is a folk opera in suggestions of native tunes" (1935). Lucien White, writing for *New York Age* (October 26, 1935), identified the work as a folk opera, praising it as "the first authentic American opera with a foundation on Negro life." *Theater Arts Monthly* critic Irving Kolodin lauded Gershwin for his use of Negro folk materials, claiming that even to the black cast "the genuine Negro quality of the idiom employed by Gershwin in *Porgy and Bess* is a source of constant amazement" (1935:861). W. J. Henderson of the *New York Sun* (October 11, 1935) declared the work a successful "folk opera" because it was "developed from the melodies and rhythmic idioms of the Negro" and went on to praise Gershwin's songs, "which echo the 'shout,' the camp meeting hymn and the spiritual" (1935).

Kramer, Davenport, and White were not alone in underscoring the Americanness of the folk opera. Reviewing the New York opening of the opera, John Mason Brown of the *New York Evening Post* (October 11, 1935) called the work "the most American opera that has yet been seen or heard." Danton Walker of the *Sunday Daily News* (October 13, 1935) proclaimed *Porgy and Bess* to be "an opera which musically is in the American idiom, lyrically in the American vernacular, and the perfect expression of a folk tale of the American soil."

Walker's remarks suggest that part of the American folkness of the opera stemmed from the nature of the story itself. Gershwin was serious when he called his opera a folktale, for in Catfish Row he and Heyward had created an imaginary and idealized folk community—a homogenous group, bound together by oral tradition and ritual, and socially isolated from (though economically dependent on) mainstream white Charleston. Kolodin pointed out that the work was "in essence a folk opera" because the chorus members were not simply bystanders, but rather a community of participants who were integrated into the fabric of the story (1935:855).¹⁷ The travails of daily life for Catfish Row's black folk could be glimpsed, author Grace Lumpkin contended, throughout the drama in which "the Negro is seen working hard at making a living, struggling against the elements, against defeat, sorrow, and the menace of the white man" (1935). Lumpkin further argued that as "a wholly American opera," *Porgy and Bess* demanded attention to the story and destinies of the characters. Thus, Porgy's decision in the last scene to leave the relative security of Catfish Row in pursuit of Bess in New York is at once tragic and uplifting—a devastating loss for the community, yet a very American affirmation of the individual folk hero's resolve to struggle on in the face of overwhelming adversity. Implicit in Lumpkin's observations (and those of the

above-mentioned critics) was that the tale of Catfish Row was an American story, portraying the lives of real American folk, who happened to be African American. Whereas the black folk of Heyward's play were perceived as primitives whose exotic otherness probably owed more to their African heritage than to their experiences as Americans, the characters of the opera were increasingly viewed as American folk struggling through an American drama.

Not all critics, however, believed Gershwin had captured the authenticity of black folk music or the spirit of a black folk community. Composer/critic Virgil Thomson questioned the validity of an outsider interpreting black folklore, branding Gershwin's opera "fake folk-lore" (1935:19). Black critics further challenged the "blackness" of Gershwin's score: Ralph Matthews of the *Baltimore Afro-American* complained that the "conservatory twang" of the singing was not in keeping with genuine black folk song (1935), and an *Amsterdam News* review (January 16, 1936) lambasted the production with a headline proclaiming "Music Not Truly Negroid, and Opera Smacks of Minstrel Days." In an interview with leftist journalist Edward Morrow, the composer/jazz band leader Duke Ellington claimed that Gershwin's score did not reflect a genuine "Negro musical idiom." Morrow went on to launch charges of exploitation against Gershwin, dismissing the opera as "lamp-black Negroisms" (a reference to minstrelsy) that "no Negro could possibly be fooled by" (1935:6).

The most thorough and thought-provoking critique came from African American composer, choral director, and critic Hall Johnson. Writing for *Opportunity* in January 1936, Johnson methodically critiqued Gershwin's score, which he claimed suffered from an overly fussy treatment of original folk themes and a lack of "authentic Negro musical language" (25). Though recognizing Gershwin's extraordinary talents, Johnson viewed him as a cultural outsider who failed to capture the "informing spirit of Negro music" in his brief (but much publicized) visits to Charleston. The result, according to Johnson, was "not a Negro opera by Gershwin, but Gershwin's idea of what a Negro opera should be. The fact that it is advertised under the broader subtitle, 'American Folk Opera,' does not disguise the specific direction of this attempt" (1936:26).

Johnson was not opposed to the idea of building American art on black folk materials, observing that "an injection of genuine Negro folk-culture may be good for the anemia of the American theatre" (28), but he insisted on an "authenticity of style [that] will be achieved only when the public has been made to see and like Negro material presented as its creators understand and feel it" (27-8). In other words, in addition to a black cast, only a team of black writers and producers could do justice to an artistic treatment of black folk culture. Gershwin and Heyward, despite their good intentions, could only fall short. Johnson poetically sums up these feelings: "So that our [African-American] folk-culture is like the growth of some hardy, yet exotic, shrub, whose fragrance never fails to delight discriminating nostrils even when there is no interest in the depths of its roots. But when the leaves are gathered by strange hands they soon wither, and when cuttings are transplanted into strange soil, they have but a short and sickly life. Only those who sowed the seed may know the secret at the root" (1936:28).

This debate over folk authenticity has not gone unnoticed by music historians. In

a 1972 reflection on the opera, Richard Crawford invoked Richard Dorson's infamous charge of fakelore (Crawford 1972:29). Clearly Gershwin's composed folk songs are to a degree the result of "invention, selection, fabrication, and similar refining processes, for capitalistic gain" (Dorson 1959:4), and, as musicologist John Johnson has suggested, the Theatre Guild may have seized on "folk" as a promotional slogan to attract a broader theater crowd (1996:551-3). But judging the ultimate folk authenticity of Gershwin's score, or whether the entire opera constitutes genuine fakelore is, from today's perspective, an irrelevant exercise.¹⁸ Far more interesting are explorations of Gershwin and Heyward's motivations for embracing the folk, and what the mid-1930s debate over authenticity reveals about public perceptions of folklore and its role in the conscious creation of national art.

Heyward's quest to portray black authenticity was initially linked with his desire to challenge his fellow southern writers to recognize the immense contributions their Negro brethren had made to the region and to begin to come to grips with the issues of race that were deeply woven into the fabric of southern life.¹⁹ Achieving this goal through a work of fiction that offered a serious and sensitive treatment of black folklife was a natural choice for a poet possessing intimate knowledge of Charleston's working-class black community, and by many counts his novel *Porgy* was an immense step forward in southern letters.

But Heyward recognized his own shortcomings in "attempting an interpretation of the inner life of an alien people" (1928:xii). This realization spurred his move from page to stage, and the employment of a black cast that could ostensibly convey Negro culture more authentically than he and Dorothy, as white outsiders, could ever hope to do. The fact that *Porgy's* black cast consisted of New Yorkers who had minimal contact with the South or southern folk traditions apparently mattered little, for, according to Heyward, the actors were able to accurately portray life in Catfish Row by "forget[ing] that they were playing parts" and simply adopting a "naturalistic performance" style (1928:xvii). For Heyward, authenticity was dependent less on familiarity with tradition and more on what he perceived to be the racial characteristics of humor, rhythm, and emotional expressiveness.

Heyward's broader agenda was to use authentic folk performance to demonstrate the tremendous artistic potential that lay pent up in African American culture. Once they had broken free of the shackles of the minstrel show and vaudeville stage and were allowed to "speak seriously on [their] own themes, [their] hopes and aspirations," Heyward believed African Americans would experience "an artistic emancipation" (1928:xx-xxi). Heyward failed to clarify the role of whites in this emancipation, but by closing the introduction to the 1928 *Porgy* play book on this note, he clearly saw white playwrights like Dorothy and himself as integral to the movement.

The Heywards' move to employ a black cast to enact what they perceived to be authentic black folk expression was at one level a dramatic success, because they exposed northern white audiences to something closer to genuine southern culture than the comical and condescending fare of popular minstrelsy and vaudeville. But the Heywards' self-avowed fascination with the primitive prevented the play from conveying a deeper sense of African American humanity. By equating authenticity with racial inheritance and portraying their characters as exotic others, they kept black

culture at a safe distance from their white audiences. The defects inherent in *Porgy* suggest that DuBose Heyward's predicted emancipation of black artists could never be fully achieved through the invocation of folk authenticity by white creators, even when coupled with black performers. In retrospect, Heyward's lofty goal would only be realized through the accomplishments of the black writers, playwrights, and composers who were spearheading the emerging Harlem Renaissance.

Gershwin's embrace of folk authenticity was complex, serving foremost as a component of a larger strategy to build his reputation as a bona fide composer of serious art music.²⁰ By moving away from jazz in favor of purer folk forms precisely at the moment when Fitzgerald proclaimed the Jazz Age "dead" (1931:13) and the rage for jazz-influenced concert music was on the wane,²¹ Gershwin was going back to the future, aligning himself with the great tradition of such nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European composers as Stravinsky, Bartok, Sibelius, and Dvorak, who used elements of native folk materials in many of their most successful works, and the operas of Bizet (*Carmen*), Mussorgsky (*Boris Godunov*), and Puccini (*Madame Butterfly*), which evoked folk idioms and exotic imagery.²² Although other late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century composers—most notably Edward MacDowell, Harry Burleigh, Henry Gilbert, and Amy Beach—had explored nativist themes, none were as successful as Gershwin at elevating folk music to the concert stage.²³ Moreover, *Porgy and Bess* proved that folk-inspired concert music could be popular and served as a model for several of the best-known composers of the 1930s and early 1940s, including Aaron Copland (*Billy the Kid*, 1938; *Rodeo*, 1942; *Appalachian Spring*, 1943), Virgil Thomson (*The Plow that Broke the Plains*, 1936; *The River*, 1937), and Roy Harris (*Third Symphony*, 1939; *Folk Song Symphony*, 1940), who based their most enduring pieces on American folk themes.

Gershwin's success at transforming folk materials into art music via a folk opera placed him in the tradition of the great European masters and in the forefront of a new generation of Americans who would compose distinctive American works based on native folk sources.²⁴ Yet his decision to locate his great American opera in a southern African American folk community set him apart from the aforementioned white composers, who based their most popular compositions primarily on Anglo/Celtic-American folk sources. Gershwin thus stood alone among major white composers of the 1930s in his commitment to an American music built on black American traditions.²⁵ By equating African American culture with an essential American folkness, Gershwin was aligning himself with the Harlem Renaissance writers and the Lomaxes, who contended that America's most profound indigenous expressions were the creations of her African slaves and their descendants. Notions of folkness, blackness, and Americanness were inexorably intertwined in the songs of Catfish Row.

This said, Gershwin's efforts to harness and transform authentic black folk music proved ultimately problematic because he did not foresee that by the 1930s the New Negro consciousness would grow increasingly uncomfortable with white interpretations of black culture, especially those that retained vestiges of minstrel stereotyping. The discourse of black folk primitivism that swirled around Heyward's play in 1927 was no longer acceptable to many black and progressive critics of the 1930s. Hall Johnson, for instance, wholeheartedly embraced the notion of grand opera based on Negro folk materials, but seriously questioned a white man's ability to compose such an opera.

Johnson's criticism underscores the complex and often paradoxical politics of race that surrounded Gershwin's opera. With the exception of Thomson and Morrow, white critics tended to ignore issues of racial representation and stereotyping, and even in historical retrospect have excused Gershwin as "a child of the time, subject to its cultural prejudice and ignorance" (Swain 1990:57). But criticisms of the opera's treatment of race that were raised by progressive black and white period critics refute such a facile stance. From their position, Gershwin and Heyward were about the business of transforming white fantasies of black sensuality, spirituality, and violence into a commodity that was marketable as entertainment for primarily white audiences. In spite of the fact that a stellar company of black artists, rather than a band of blackface minstrel buffoons, was recruited to breathe life into the production, the exploitive nature of the white composer/black performer could not be easily dismissed. Moreover, the conflation of Catfish Row's earthy naturalness with the savage violence and uncontrollable libido often associated with its inhabitants inevitably led to troubling racial stereotyping.²⁶

Gershwin's brush with the folk yielded mixed results. The opera did endure and eventually helped solidify Gershwin's place in the pantheon of great American composers. But the canonization of *Porgy and Bess* owes more to Gershwin's genius as a writer of melody than to the work's contested status as a folk opera. In hindsight, Gershwin might have saved himself a great deal of grief had he not proclaimed his work a "folk opera" or had he refrained from announcing in the *New York Times* that he had written genuine spirituals and folk songs. But these pronouncements unleashed a provocative debate that underscored conflicting notions of folkness among period critics while suggesting a more expansive vision of who might constitute America's folk.

Porgy and Bess took its place among a growing legion of highbrow music, literature, and visual art that sought to elevate the art of the common person in the name of America—a movement reminiscent of Herder's romantic nationalism that championed the folk as the soul of the nation. The possibility that a New York Jewish composer (George Gershwin) and his lyricist brother (Ira Gershwin), in tandem with a southern WASP librettist (DuBose Heyward), a Russian immigrant director (Rouben Mamoulian), and a cast of conservatory-trained African American singers (Todd Duncan, Anne Brown, Eva Jessye, and company) could forge a great American folk opera fit neatly into populist dreams of a diverse and inclusive melting pot. By introducing the notion that America's folk could be black, that a southern Negro community could be, in the words of Walter Kramer, "illustrative of American life," the opera challenged the hegemony of Anglo-American tradition that folk song collectors like Cecil Sharp and nativists like Henry Ford had promoted in previous decades (Becker and Franco 1988:26–40). Because of the opera's immense popularity, and the tremendous amount of acclaim and criticism it garnered from the press, *Porgy and Bess* became an active agent in the push to build national art on indigenous folk traditions while simultaneously broadening the public's perceptions of America's folk to include and even privilege African Americans.

But Hall Johnson's challenge to Gershwin's claim of folk authenticity brought into question the validity of such a black/white collaboration in the name of national art. Rather than seeing his people's traditions as the distilled essence of a national ethos, Johnson argued that black folk tradition sprang from the soul of black folks and thus

could be interpreted and fully appreciated only by African Americans who had “sowed the seed” and who knew “the secret at the root” (1936:28). Johnson’s call for a cultural base for authentic folk expression posed serious problems for white composers, and may explain in part why Copland, Thomson, and Harris did not make extensive use of black folk materials in their populist works of the later 1930s and early 1940s, whereas African American composers Duke Ellington and William Grant Still became the period’s foremost orchestral interpreters of black spirituals and folk songs. This particularist view of folk music would eventually challenge not only the use of black folk material by white composers, but also the involvement of white popular performers in the realms of blues, jazz, and, most recently, hip hop.²⁷

The notion of folk as the ethos of a nation versus as the soul of a particular cultural group collided in the mid-1930s, with the latter eventually holding sway, as scholars and cultural critics argued convincingly for an ethnographic and pluralist base to traditional culture that belied the possibility of a single American folk culture, be it Anglo-Celtic or African American.²⁸ *Porgy and Bess* stood at the crossroads of that collision—a popular romantic nationalist text that could not deliver the authenticity it promised, thereby underscoring the difficulties inherent in forging a folk-inspired national art in a diverse and democratic society. Indeed, the flurry of folk-tinged concert music in the late 1930s waned by the close of World War II, as American composers veered toward new forms of sound organization (i.e., Arnold Schoenberg’s serialism and John Cage’s indeterminacy), experimental technologies, and aesthetic systems influenced by Asian and African traditions. At the same time, urban Americans turned away from staged interpretations of folk culture in favor of more direct consumption of traditional music through the song books, recordings, and folk concerts being promoted by public-minded folklorists like the Lomaxes and the Seegers. The folk music revival, rather than folk operas or folk symphonies, would flourish in postwar America.²⁹

Although the opera’s authentic folkness was brought into serious question by period critics such as Johnson, *Porgy and Bess* did generate a critical debate that propelled the triangulation of folkness, blackness, and Americanness into the national consciousness at a crucial moment when the country was struggling to define who its folk were and how folk heritage(s) could form the foundation of a common American identity. By presenting its Negro cast as bona fide American folk, rather than minstrel caricatures or African primitives, the opera brought national attention to southern black folklife and the immense contributions of its purveyors to the American cultural stew. The door had cracked open for the spiritual-singing folk of Catfish Row to take a seat at the table where they might dine with Steinbeck’s wandering Oakies, Lomax’s singing cowboys, Henry Ford’s fiddling hillbillies, and Grant Wood’s stoic farmers, who had come to embody a deep and distinctly American mythos during the tough times of the Great Depression.

Notes

A shorter version of this article was presented at the October 2002 meetings of the American Folklore Society. I wish to thank George Cunningham, Julia Hirsch, Wayne Schneider, Philip Rupprecht, and Laurie Russell for their helpful comments on earlier drafts.

1. Hollis Alpert's *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess* (1990) is a thorough, though poorly sourced popular history that traces the evolution of *Porgy and Bess* from Heyward's 1925 novel through the 1927 play, the 1935 opera, the 1942 Broadway revival, the 1952 revival that toured Europe and the Soviet Union, and Otto Preminger's 1959 film. Other useful historic accounts of the opera appear in two Gershwin biographies by Charles Schwartz (1973:243–73) and Edward Jablonski (1987:250–91). Analysis of the opera's best-known songs is found in Deena Rosenberg (1991:263–320). For more formal analyses of opera's music, see Wilfrid Mellers (1965:392–437), Joseph Swain (1990:51–72), and Wayne Schneider (1999:21–34). The only serious discussion of the relationship between *Porgy and Bess* and American folklore is found in Richard Crawford's brief but provocative essay, "It Ain't Necessarily Soul: Gershwin's 'Porgy and Bess' as a Symbol" (1972, esp. pp. 26–30).

2. Regina Bendix's *In Search of Authenticity* (1997) is a superb intellectual history that surveys the place of authenticity within the discipline of folklore studies in Germany and the United States. Her premise that authenticity is by nature a "constructed and deceptive" (228) phenomenon, and one that plays an essential role in the formation of nationalist philosophies, is central to the interpretations offered in this essay. Roger D. Abrahams (1993) provides further insights into the intrinsic problems of invoking folkness, invented traditions, and imagined communities for the cause of nationalism.

3. According to Max Harrison, the term "symphonic jazz" was coined in the 1920s to refer to attempts by composers to combine jazz with classical forms (1986:509). Writing in *Vanity Fair* in June 1925, Virgil Thomson referred to the new jazz/classical fusion as "highbrow jazz" (54).

4. Culture critics of the 1920s, including Van Vechten, used the term "jazz" in reference to syncopated Tin Pan Alley songs and dance music played primarily by whites for whites, as opposed to the bluesier improvised music that was just beginning to emerge from urban black communities in New Orleans, Chicago, and Harlem. The latter would eventually be recognized by historians as serious black jazz, while the former downplayed as popular white adaptations. See Hamm (1995:309–10).

5. The French composer Darius Milhaud is generally credited with writing the first symphonic jazz piece, *La Creation du Monde*, which premiered in Paris in the fall of 1923, several months prior to the debut of Gershwin's *Rhapsody*. But as musicologist Carol Oja points out, Milhaud's jazz-inflected ballet score was not well known in the United States until it was performed in New York City in 1933 and, thus, was probably not an inspiration for Gershwin's piece (Oja 1994:659). In addition to Milhaud's *La Creation du Monde* and Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* and *Concerto in F*, significant symphonic jazz pieces by American composers included Aaron Copland's *Music for the Theatre* (1925) and *Piano Concerto* (1926), George Antheil's *Jazz Symphony* (1925), Fred Grofe's *Metropolis* (1928), and William Grant Still's *Afro American Symphony* (1931). Though Gershwin's works would be the most enduring, many period critics viewed Milhaud and Copland's compositions as more sophisticated concert music. See Harrison (1986) and Oja (1994:656–68). Ironically, none of these pieces included the solo instrumental improvisation that eventually became the hallmark of African American jazz.

6. Gershwin himself entered the debate over the place of jazz in American composition with a series of articles in which he proclaimed jazz nothing short of America's "new national anthem" (*Theater Magazine*, August 1925), the "voice of the American soul" (*Theatre Magazine*, March 1927), and "the only musical idiom in existence that could aptly express America" (*American Hebrew*, November 1929).

7. For more on *Blue Monday*, see Jablonski (1987:113–4) and Johnson (1999).

8. According to Schwartz, Gershwin considered approaching the Metropolitan Opera House to produce his opera, but opted against it because of the Met's ban on black performers and because the Theater Guild offered the possibility of a more lucrative, extended Broadway run (Schwartz 1973:250).

9. For an overview of the importance of folk tradition in recasting national identity during the Depression, see Jane Becker's essay, "Revealing Traditions: The Politics of Culture and Community in America, 1888–1988," (Becker and Franco 1988, esp. 40–5). See also Simon Bronner's introduction to *Folk Nation* (2002) and the essays that follow by writers and critics who championed folk culture during the Depression, including B.A. Botkin, Ruth Suckow, Holger Cahill, and Allen Eaton.

10. A reprint of Suckow's 1930 article, "The Folk Idea in American Life," and commentary are found in Bronner (2002:145–60).

11. For more on the impact of the 1932 MOMA folk art show, see Bronner (2002:161–2) and the reprint of curator Cahill's 1932 introduction to the show entitled "Folk Art: Its Place in the American Tradition" in Bronner (2002:162–8).

12. David Whisnant (1983:185) identified four significant folk festivals that arose during this period: Bascom Lamar Lunsford's Mountain Dance and Folk Festival, in Asheville, North Carolina (1928); Jean Thomas's American Folk Song Festival, in Ashland, Kentucky (1930); Annabel Morris Buchanan's White Top Folk Festival, in southwest Virginia (1931); and Sarah Gertrude Knott's National Folk Festival (1934).

13. For example, Copland's brief tone poem *John Henry* (1940) takes its melody directly from the transcription of the folk song by the same name found in Lomaxes' *American Folk Songs and Ballads*. Copland's ballet score for *Rodeo* (1942) quotes directly from Ruth Crawford Seeger's transcription of the folk fiddle tune "Bonypart," as well as from transcriptions of the cowboy songs "Sis Joe" and "If He'd Been a Buckaroo" as published in the Lomaxes' 1941 collection *Our Singing Country* (see Howard Pollack [1999:334, 367]). Virgil Thomson's score for the film *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (1936) quotes cowboy tunes from John Lomax's *Cowboy Songs and other Frontier Ballads* (1910) and Sandburg's *The American Songbag* (1927) (see Daniel Kingman [1990:461–5]).

14. For a discussion of Lomaxes' 1933 southern collecting trip and the impact of their subsequent song books on broadening the American folk song canon to include more African American material, see Benjamin Filene (2000:49–55). There were, of course, older collections of African American folk music—most notably William Allen's *Slave Songs of the United States* (1867) and collections like *The Negro and His Songs* (1925) and *Negro Workaday Songs* (1926) by Howard Odum and Guy Johnson—but these volumes attracted less public attention than did the Lomax song books in the 1930s.

15. Paul Allen Anderson's *Deep River: Music and Memory in Harlem Renaissance Thought* (2001) offers a useful discussion of Locke and Du Bois's views of folk spirituals as "vessels of black social memory" (5) and the adaptation of the songs to more formal stage music (see especially pages 1–13 and the individual chapters on Du Bois [59–112] and Locke [13–166]).

16. A historical overview of the rise of the concert spiritual in the 1920s is found in Eileen Southern's *The Music of Black Americans* (1997:408–24). Anderson reports that Van Vechten preferred the earthier sound of Paul Robeson to the more refined style of Roland Hayes (2001:7). Hughes and Hurston championed rural folk blues and spirituals over concertized spirituals and through-composed art music, arguing that the latter examples smacked of assimilation and were not genuine representations of folk practice. (See Anderson's discussions of Hughes and Hurston, pp. 167–217.) Such arguments underscore the problems inherent in adapting black folk styles to the formal structures of European art music, even when bona fide southern folk spirituals were arranged and performed by African Americans.

17. Similar sentiments have been expressed by contemporary drama critic Joseph Swain, who argues that *Porgy and Bess* was "an opera in which 'the folk' taken as a group, acting together, becomes an important if not central character in the drama" (1990:58).

18. There is clearly truth to charges that Gershwin failed to capture the stylistic essence of black folk music. With the exception of street calls and group prayer scenes, most of the opera's singing is rendered in a *bel canto* opera style that shares little with the fluidity of southern black folk singing which is characterized by subtle melodic improvisation, slurring and bending of the diatonic scale, and rich timbral variations. Songs like Sportin' Life's "Ain't Necessarily So," while departing from opera delivery, are closer to urban vaudeville and Broadway styles than rural folk music. Although certain songs may reflect the flavor of blues or spirituals, the opera's harmonic structures and overall form are clearly derived from late romantic and early modern symphonic influences.

19. Heyward outlines the problem of race faced by southern writers in "The New Note in Southern Literature" (1925).

20. In spite of the success of his earlier concert jazz—especially *Rhapsody in Blue*—Gershwin was still viewed by influential critics such as Paul Rosenfeld and Virgil Thomson as a Tin Pan Alley amateur whose music was better suited for the Broadway stage than the concert hall (Oja 1994:655–6).

21. Copland, Gershwin's main competitor in the arena of concert jazz, quickly moved away from jazz in the late 1920s in favor of more dissonant modern compositions and eventually to his popular folk-influenced works of the late 1930s. As Kingman points out, orchestral or symphonic jazz was on the decline by the late 1920s, and future classical/jazz fusions would arise from jazz composers consciously incorporating European elements of form, harmony, and melody into their work (Kingman 1990:460).

22. A useful overview of the relationship between European art music and national identity in the nineteenth and early twentieth century is found in Richard Taruskin's review of nationalism in the *New*

Grove Dictionary of Music (2001). As Taruskin notes, the term "nationalism" and its application to musical canons are problematic, because musical nationalism refers to a "condition" or "attitude" rather than to a set of specific stylistic characteristics (2001:689). For a more general discussion of nationalism as a cultural construction, see Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983).

23. Composers such as MacDowell, Burleigh, Gilbert, and Beach were responding in part to a challenge from Czech composer Antonin Dvorak, who, during his heralded visit to the United States in the 1890s, implored American composers to seek inspiration from the folk songs of their common people, especially African American and Native American traditional expressions (Dvorak 1893).

24. For more on the self-conscious attempts by Depression-era American composers to create distinctive American music based on folk music sources, see the discussions by Crawford (2001:586–96) and Kingman (1990:458–71).

25. During the 1920s and early 1930s, a number of African American composers, including Burleigh, James P. Johnson, and Still, sought to compose extended works based on blues, spirituals, and related black folk styles. Still's *Afro-American Symphony* (1931) is recognized as the most successful of these pieces. See Southern (1997:431–4).

26. A discussion of the problematic nature of stereotyping often associated with the folk label in the context of romantic nationalist movements is found in Abrahams (1993:28–9).

27. A discussion of the appropriation of jazz and black pop music is found in Amiri Baraka's provocative essay "Black Music: Its Roots, Its Popularity, Its Commercial Prostitution" (1982).

28. Since the founding of the American Folklore Society in 1888, American folklorists have maintained a healthy skepticism for the notion of a singular national folklore, favoring rather a pluralistic view of American tradition that mirrors the country's cultural diversity. Twentieth-century popular writers, culture critics, and media producers, however, have occasionally argued for an overarching national folklore. Debates over attempts to harness American traditions in the name of national exceptionalism or national diversity are well summarized in the introduction to Bronner (2002:3–70).

29. For a thorough history of the folk music revival in postwar America, see Ronald Cohen (2002).

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